

A political balance sheet of the German train drivers strike

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Eight months ago, at the beginning of August 2007, nearly 96 percent of German train drivers and conductors in the GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer) union voted in favour of strike action. One month earlier, train drivers in the 12,000-strong union had blocked the entire railway system and brought rail traffic to a halt for several hours in a limited strike.

Following years of collaboration with management by all of the unions in the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), which had agreed to a long series of wage and benefit cuts and sought to limit labour disputes to ineffective protests, the strike by train drivers had an electrifying effect. Despite having to endure long delays, passengers broadly supported the train drivers' struggle.

The workforce at German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) has been halved to 185,000 since the Railway reform of 1994. Just over the past two years, wages fell by an average of 10 percent, while working conditions deteriorated as a result of a complicated shift system and shortened rest periods.

These attacks on the workers generated broad public support for the demands of the GDL for a 31 percent wage increase and a reduction in work hours. These demands were advanced in connection with the demand for a new contract covering all train drivers, conductors and service personnel. Many workers saw the drivers' dispute as the start of an offensive to reverse years of give-backs in wages and working conditions.

Against the drivers a broad front developed, consisting of the grand coalition government, backed by all of the establishment parties, including the Left Party, the DGB union federation and most of the media. They regarded the train drivers' action as the beginning of a rebellion against the central axis of the government's policy of social welfare cuts—first introduced by the previous Social Democratic-led government of Gerhard Schröder in the form of the “Agenda 2010” and continually intensified thereafter.

The grand coalition government, consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD), at first reined in the DB executive, which was intent on smashing the GDL, but then worked together with the DGB and the biggest rail union, Transnet, to bring the train drivers to their knees.

Under these conditions, the GDL began to pare back its

demands and retreat step by step until it finally capitulated.

Just a month after the strike ballot, the union accepted the decision of a supposedly “independent” arbitration committee and yielded on its demand for a contract covering all “driving personnel.” From then on, the union was restricted to representing train drivers to the exclusion of all other related occupational groups, which are forced to work under similarly bad conditions and receive even less pay than the drivers.

At the end of last year, the GDL dropped its demand for a 31 percent wage increase and signalled its readiness to accept an increase comparable to that already agreed by Transnet. In March of this year, the GDL leadership signed a contract that contains none of the union's original demands and satisfies the main demand of the arbitrators—i.e., for the “smooth” integration of the GDL into the existing DB contract system, which is dominated by the Transnet union.

At present, the GDL executive committee is trying to cast its deal in the best possible light and force it through in the face of broad rank-and-file resistance. It is stressing that it managed to win its principal demand for an “independent contract.” In fact, this demand for independence was ambiguous from the outset.

GDL members demanded such a contract as a means of escaping from the straitjacket of the contract agreed to by Transnet and the rail officials' union, the GDBA, both of which work hand in glove with the DB executive and the government. By threatening to resign from the GDL, a majority of GDL members had been able to force the union leadership to break with the DB contract pattern in 2002.

The nominal independence of the GDL, under conditions where it voluntarily agrees to remain within the DB contract system, is, in fact, directed against the interests of the GDL membership. The GDL executive obtained acknowledgment of its status as a lawful party in the negotiation of contracts, thereby securing the interests of the union apparatus. In return, it yielded on all of its original demands and accepted a contract that is antithetical to the needs of the GDL membership.

The train drivers' struggle raises important political lessons. It makes clear that it is impossible to fight against wage-cutting and worsening working conditions simply by changing unions in the hope that a smaller organisation can be better and more effectively controlled by the membership.

The militancy of the train drivers was a source of inspiration for other workers, and many applications for new membership have arrived at the local offices of the GDL. For their part, the GDL functionaries go to great lengths to explain to applicants that the union cannot do anything for them unless they are directly employed as train drivers.

The organisational limitations of the GDL are directly bound up with its political standpoint. As representatives of an occupational group that can still exert considerable pressure through a strike involving relatively few workers, the GDL leaders had hoped to squeeze out more concessions than other unions, while at the same time refraining from any sort of challenge to the capitalist system. Such a standpoint, however, completely underestimates the extent of the economic crisis and the determination of the ruling elite to defend its system and privileges at all costs.

DB Chairman Hartmut Mehdorn and his executive committee could rely on the support of the entire German business and political elite, which is determined to impose its agenda, centred on the drive for maximum profits and personal enrichment, upon society as a whole.

Unrestrained competition must be allowed to dominate every aspect of society. Just a few days after the GDL put its signature to the contract, Mehdorn and German Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD) announced plans for the rapid privatisation of the railways.

A well-functioning and modern transport system, built up over many decades with taxpayer money, is to be denationalised and transformed into a company geared solely to the enrichment of shareholders. At the same time, the DB executive, which raised its income by 70 percent in just one year and earns a total of 20 million euros for just eight persons, maintains that there is no cash to pay decent wages and provide reasonable working conditions.

The situation has intensified in line with the aggravation of the international financial crisis. According to the latest estimates, the losses that will be suffered by international banks resulting from the US subprime loan crisis will amount to around 600 billion euros. An estimated 200 billion euros in losses will be registered by German banks.

Not one of the speculators and semi-criminals who have shovelled hundreds of millions into their own pockets has been brought to book or made to repay the losses arising from their financial operations. Instead, the losses are to be imposed on the working population in the form of further cuts in social programmes. The state has already provided support amounting to more than 15 billion euros for a number of German banks (IKB—7.2billion, WestLB—3.8billion, SachsenLB—2.8billion, Bayern LB—2.4 billion).

In light of these developments, the perspective of the German unions, based on social partnership with management and co-participation, has been transformed into a policy of direct complicity with big business and the government in attacks on

workers and the population as a whole. The GDL is no exception.

The contract agreed by the GDL fails to resolve a single problem confronting the train drivers and their families. It does not mean an end to the dispute, but is rather the prelude to further conflict.

Train drivers and all other sections of the working class confront major class battles and must prepare appropriately. This requires above all a conscious political break with the limited conceptions of the trade unions. Events are making it increasingly clear that the needs of the working population cannot be harmonised with the drive for profits by the companies and banks.

The plundering of society's wealth and resources by a privileged elite can be countered only through an open political struggle against the capitalist system on the basis of a socialist perspective. Large-scale production and vital services such as the railways must be removed from the control of the financial aristocracy and placed at the service of society as a whole.

This is the significance of a socialist perspective and party.

A centre of the train drivers' strike lay in the former East Germany, and this is where disillusionment is greatest over the rotten compromise struck by the GDL leadership.

It is barely 20 years since the collapse of the Stalinist-run German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the reunification of Germany. At that time, the biggest lie of the twentieth century was revived and spread—i.e., that the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and the GDR represented a form of socialism. This served as the ideological cover for the reimposition of capitalism and smoothed the way for the reestablishment of capitalist exploitation, in the name of freedom and democracy. The dire consequences for the vast majority of the population in both east and west Germany are well known.

It is necessary to draw a political balance sheet and study the programme of the Socialist Equality Party (PSE), which fought during the period of capitalist restoration on the basis of a socialist perspective, opposing both capitalism and Stalinism.

See Also:

Verdi trade union prepares sell-out of Berlin transport strike
[20 March 2008]

GDL union completes sell-out of German train drivers' struggle
[18 March 2008]

Left Party attacks striking transport workers in Berlin
[14 March 2008]



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